

Community Assistantship Program

**Farm to Schools Lunch Program:
Implementing Local Rochester-Area Foods
Into School Lunches**

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Prepared in partnership with
Land Stewardship Project/ERC

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Fall Semester, 2001

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Executive Summary

Farm to School lunch programs are beginning to pop up across the nation. While they are successful in warmer climates like California and Florida, their success is shared by climate-sensitive states like New York and Iowa. Rochester desires to create a program in its area, with the abundance of farms, especially organic and ‘green’ farming. Because obesity is on the rise, and unhealthy school lunches are likely to be a factor, introducing fresh, local foods into school lunches is an excellent alternative to frozen pizza and chicken nuggets. Not only does it stimulate the local economy, but also children become more connected to the food they eat, as they can know where and how it can be grown. This paper discusses these topics a bit in depth, explains the process thus far, and gives recommendations to make the Rochester area Farm to Schools lunch program a success, including allowing more interns work on the project, and have more people from the area involved.

Introduction

Imagine going through a high school cafeteria lunch line and being able to choose from fresh lettuce, tomatoes, fruits and vegetables picked less than a week ago, homemade cheeses, fresh-squeezed juices, and fresh meats. And imagine how surprised students would be to find that all of this food was grown less than 50 miles from their school. With the Rochester area Farm to School lunch program, this idea can become a reality. With the hard work and dedication of the school, local farmers, and members of the community, the Farm to Schools lunch program can exist as it does in schools across the nation.

The issues that brought about this program are centered around healthier food choices for students, because obesity among children is on the rise. Also, because the Rochester area is a strong farming community, it makes sense to keep the local economy healthy and thriving. Why have food shipped from another state, or even another country, when the food can be grown locally and is usually fresher?

Issues of concern include availability of a wide variety of food, processing it so it is easily prepared for school lunches, and potential increasing costs of fresh, local foods. These concerns will be addressed in this report.

Vision Statement

The vision of the Rochester area Farm to Schools lunch program is to create a partnership between schools (and longer term, universities, hospitals and nursing homes) and farmers to supply schools with local, fresh foods for school lunches. Because obesity is on the rise locally and nationally, fresh foods are a welcoming alternative to processed meat patties and frozen pizza. Students seem to have a stronger connection with where their food comes from if they know where their food is grown, which is a main goal with the Farm-to-Schools lunch program.

Goals and Objectives

Based on the desires of the community, including fueling the local economy, allowing for more choices for children, in addition to bringing awareness to childhood obesity, the vision guiding this project is to allow local foods to be shipped either direct to schools or to local canneries and distributors. While staying true to the visions of the area for a sustainable future, this plan can promote economic and social growth by giving financial and social options to the community.

Goals and Objectives

To reach the goals of the Farm to Schools lunch program, the following objectives guide the study:

- Contact students and staff, food service workers, and teachers at local high schools,
- Discuss project with high school organizations such as environmental clubs and neighborhood associations,
- Communicate with extension services, local businesses, and Rochester tourist information, and
- Provide recommendations for the Farm to School lunch program options.

Methods

While this project is on going and has continued after I have left Land Stewardship Project, there have been a variety of tasks necessary to understand and complete a program of this nature. Researching other programs was an important first step, such as Cornell University's program. They have created this program within a comprehensive, 4-year project called "From Farm to School: Improving Small Farm Viability and School Meals."ⁱ

In addition, Iowa has also created a Farm-to-Schools lunch program, in order to "improve the economic stability of Iowa's small farmers while improving the long-term health of school children."ⁱⁱ Concentrating on states that have climates similar climates as Minnesota has been necessary in understanding how a program like this can be successful in Minnesota, in addition to answering people's questions with similar concern. Southern and warmer climates, such as in California and North Carolina have already begun to have in place extensive local foods in the school lunches, especially in the form of "farmers market salad bars," such as at Pioneer Elementary School in Davis, Californiaⁱⁱⁱ

Recommendations

Because the program continued after the semester was over, a lot of aspects of the project can, and probably will be carried out. More farmers, locally and nationally, can be contacted to get their support or ideas. It was difficult to contact members of local schools, including school board members, science and food nutrition teachers, and student groups, to obtain their opinion and ideas on the project. Ideally, they would attend meetings arranged by myself and other Land Stewardship Project members, to allow people to voice their opinions and learn about this program and opportunity. By using the Rochester School Districts' web pages, contact was made via email. However, very few people responded back. Out of the 60-some people I emailed, I believe I received a total of 8 responses back. Phone calls may have been more helpful, but those were not available or listed on web pages anywhere.

The City of Rochester and surrounding area not only have a lot of people, but also cover a large area geographically. Because these issues of the Farm to School program is of immediate concern to that area, it may have been more helpful to have people who actually live in the area, and who know the area and people to work on this project. Having a distance barrier of a two-hour drive made some aspects of the program rather difficult. In addition, having more than one student working on the program would have also made things a bit more manageable, and to allow ideas to bounce off of each other. Combining these two ideas, such as having one local student and someone from the Twin Cities, could combine the strengths of the aspects of the program.

Because a key player at Land Stewardship Project left that organization mid-semester, it also may have been helpful to have someone whom the student could maintain contact with be the student's supervisor. A program of this magnificence is difficult, especially while being done away from the area that is being researched. Frequent open communication is necessary in order to achieve the level of success for this Farm-to-Schools lunch program.

Conclusion

With obesity on the rise in children, and the desire to have fresh foods available for students at lunchtime, programs like the Farm to Schools lunch program are a wonderful opportunity to assist in both of these situations. Schools from California and New York have been very successful in creating fresh, local choices for students while maintaining a cost-effective lunch program. Even in winter-sensitive areas like Iowa have been victorious in creating such programs. While it helps the local economy as well as stimulates children's desire to know where food comes from, there are many benefits to Farm to School lunch programs. A few suggestions to creating a successful program have been given in hopes that the program in the Rochester area can be just as successful as other areas. With healthier food choices comes healthier children.

References

ⁱ <http://www.news.cornell.edu/Chronicles/8.23.01/farm-school.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Connection/2001Winter/winwin.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/News/0009apr.htm>